EI-1425
SONDRA STETIN GASH
BIRTHDATE: DECEMBER 7, 1934
INTERVIEW DATE: AUGUST 2, 2006
AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 71
RUNNING TIME: 1:28:02
INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.
RECORDING ENGINEER: SAME
INTERVIEW LOCATION: TEWKSBERRY TOWNSHIP, NJ
TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: EVAN TAPARATA
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: IRV SILBERG; HELEN HENWOOD

HISTORIAN'S NOTE: The following interview was conducted with Sondra Gash, a woman of Polish descent who was born as a second generation United States citizen. Ms. Gash's father, Sol Stetin, was born in Pabianice, Poland (near Lodz), and arrived in the United States at the age of 10 in 1921.

LEVINE: Today is August the 2nd, the year 2006, I'm here in Tewksberry Township, New Jersey with Sondra Gash, who I met because she was giving a talk for the Save Ellis Island Group to a group of teachers at Ellis Island. She is a writer, a prose writer and poet, and she has written, among other things, about her father's immigration experience. And, this is Janet Levine, for the National Parks Service. If we could just start at the beginning, and you would say your birth date and where you were born.

GASH: December 7, 1934, in Paterson New Jersey, at the general hospital (Subtle laughter).

LEVINE: Ok. And (Clears throat), excuse me. Did you live in Paterson, in your growing up years?

GASH: Yes. Until I went away to college, I lived in Paterson. Then I lived in New York City for a while and then I moved to New Jersey again, after I married.

LEVINE: Ok. And what was your maiden name?

GASH: Stetin. S-T-E-T-I-N.

LEVINE: Ok. And, now, your father came here in, we were talking, in 1921.

GASH: Right.

LEVINE: And he was ten years of age?

GASH: Yes.

LEVINE: Ok. Now, what was it about your father's immigrant experience that piqued your interest, curiosity, made it a subject for you to write about?

GASH: His high regard, for his – I'm getting a little teary already – his high regard for his immigrant experience. His experience as an American immigrant was very crucial to his own self concept, in my view. He was very proud to be an American, he, in a way, enjoyed telling stories about his early years and how he grew and developed and learned a lot because of his opportunity. He thought this was a wonderful place of great opportunity – and he developed a real concern for people that were poor, needy, and working class people. Workers, became his lifelong interest. And it grew out of his own experience. And he always wanted to go back. As long as I can remember, he wanted to get back to Poland; and he was eighty-six years old, and we finally went. It was wonderful – it was a beautiful trip. My mother wasn't up to it. I went with him and my sister's daughter went with him, so three generations of us went back to the town he was from.

LEVINE: Wow. Did he ever talk to you about those first ten years? First of all, where in Poland was he?

GASH: He was born in a town called Pabianice, P-A-B-I-A-N-I-C-E, which was the suburb – if you can call it that – the village, near Lodz – which I think they pronounce "Woodg" – and it's L-O-D-Z.

LEVINE: Ok, and did he ever talk to you about his early experiences in Poland?

GASH: Yes. In fact, if I read this poem that I've written, you might get a feeling for what he was about.

LEVINE: Wonderful, ok why don't you do that then.

GASH: [Begins just before Levine finishes her previous sentence] It incorporates – oh excuse me – it incorporates a bit more than just his experience in Poland, but his whole – I think the word is hegira – you know that word?

LEVINE: (Subtle laughter) I don't know that one.

GASH: His whole experience of travel. Psychological travel, you know, spiritual travel.

LEVINE: Ok,

GASH: (Begins to recite poem) "Bold Heart." You dreamed of leaving. Leaving the ghetto village. That dusky alley in Pabianice where you were born. Then one day with your family, you arrived at the station. But somehow, in the crowd, in the rush, they left without you. As the train chugged away, hissing steam, your mother's face at the window, her hands banging the glass. "Momma, don't be afraid, I'll find you." Were you afraid? A runty, Jew boy of ten? Alone, on a dark platform? A foreigner, wearing an oversized coat, with curly, wood buttons. A woman

took your hand. A policeman set you on the train that led to Stetin, the German port where they were waiting. Then, the big open pit, called steerage. You sneaked down to the hold of the ship and found the kitchen where, bold as a bird in search of bread, you begged for crumbs. On the deck, your white shirt flew like a goose in the wind.

Did your feet have wings? How did you know one longing leads to another? Feisty, boychik; who taught you such hope? When the ferry crossed the Hudson, you found your new home; Silk City, that small, railroad flat on Bridge Street, near the river. When you sold balloons for pennies, when you hawked papers on the downtown streets, did you like the turbulence of that rough bazaar? When you brought lunch to the mill for your father, stood up and peered through tall, dingy windows, was it the roar of noisy shuttles, workers lined up in rows like machines, that roused you? Street-smart, cunning; boy who knew how to fly. You must have felt you belonged. Did you already know you had the magic in you? Agitator, organizer, fighter for justice?

From the 30s on, 'not giving up' has been your god. Itinerant father, lover of picket lines, meeting halls, late-night celebrations, I remember the pictures of Norman Thomas, John L. Lewis, Roosevelt, pinned up on your office walls. Born, in the crowded dusk of the old world, you found light in the wide open dark of the new. (tearful) It wasn't money that drove you; you wanted to do something important. Old father, now ninety-five, and despite forgetfulness, weak legs, falls, still the peddler of wings. Still your date book filled with the future, still letters to friends all over the country, still saying: "If you don't like the way things are, go out and change them." Still your bold heart. When we walked on the grounds of your retirement home, you would not say a word about what you wanted. A proper burial, cremation, your ashes sprinkled over the sea. When people stop to tell you that Jack, who sang in the chorus, had died, and Sally was with us no more, you share your regrets. Then said to me, as we moved along, "Death, I'm not interested. It's not part of my plan."

So he had a lot of spirit. I think I tried to capture that sense, of his spirit.

LEVINE: Oh, it's a beautiful poem, yeah.

GASH: And then there's one other that is about that experience,

LEVINE: Ok,

GASH: I'll read that quickly.

"Sepia Photo, 1920." Here is my father, a boy of ten just off the boat. Baggy trousers, held up with suspenders, head titled forward, stiff pitch of shoulders, small feisty Jew boy, standing slightly apart from sisters and brothers, hoarding street light in Downtown Manhattan. Argument, already shining, in his dark lidded eyes, in his fist, already raised.

So I felt that looking at this picture, I could see my father's character -- his assertiveness, his ambition, already in that picture. The way he

stood there, in contrast to his sisters and brothers. Or broth- his brother wasn't in the picture, I'm sorry. His sister, two sisters, and parents.

LEVINE: Wow, so he got to hear those poems?

GASH: Yes.

LEVINE: Yeah, that's wonderful, yeah.

GASH: Yeah he, I think he really enjoyed – he had a big ego and he liked attention. (Both laugh)

LEVINE: Well, he deserved it, right?

GASH: Yes, he did. He was a good guy.

LEVINE: Why don't you say what he did accomplish?

GASH: Yes, I can say that. My father started out in Paterson, working as a shipping clerk in a silk mill. And he rose to become the President of the Textile Workers Union of America. And he was a very – special, I think – labor leader, because he had -- he's – had a lot of integrity. He was res-- respected for that. A kind of person who was very honest, and sometimes people have very negative views of labor leaders. But he was, had -- he just had a very pure heart. And he must have been a tough guy as a negotiator, but I never saw that side of him. I saw him as a idealistic human being.

LEVINE: And do you know why his family came to settle in Paterson to begin with?

GASH: Yes. They felt the need to make more money, to live a better life, to have more education. He always said that they wanted a better life, and they had – he said to me that he, once, even when he was ten, living there – and maybe younger – he would see, once in a while, the newspapers from this country and somebody would interpret for him. And he had this dream, of what America would be like. It's true, that when he came here, later, he began to hear about sweatshops, and problems in this country too, but it never destroyed his dream of what America was and could be.

LEVINE: Did the family have other relatives in Paterson? Is that why Paterson was chosen as the place to settle?

GASH: To make it, I'll tell you a little thing. What happened was, for years he carried around a ragged piece of paper, that said that his brother – his older brother who had come to this country earlier – had permission from the City Hall of Passaic, New Jersey to bring his family here because he now could sponsor them, he had enough money to bring them here. And they wanted to come, and that's why they came, because the brother sponsored them. His brother was about ten years older than he was.

LEVINE: I see. So it was the brother who came first, not the father?

GASH: Not the father. The brother came – my father used to say that he ran away to England to visit some people they knew – distant cousin – and he never came back (Laughs). He was going just to visit the cousin, but he decided to take a boat and he came to America. Contacted them as soon as he could, and told them that they would come soon.

LEVINE: Did you know that brother?

GASH: Yes, yes.

LEVINE: And could you say something about his temperament, or character traits?

GASH: Yes, very different from my father. He loved music – opera – he went to the opera all the time. He lived in the Bronx. He was -- he married and had two children, and he was not an activist, by temperament. He was a more withdra – you know, a more placid, interior kind of person – than my father. But very good to his family too. Family bond was very strong. My father, and the way he talked about his parents, with such high regard for his mother, his father. And even though there was a story, that I heard from my aunt – his sister – that when my grandfather once got a little bit, uh, he raised his fist to one of the children – and my uncle did not live there anymore, he was already out on his own – my father was there and he said, "Dad, you won't do that again, you can't hit people." And my father was that kind of a guy, pretty gentle. He couldn't tolerate any kind of violence, he was, he was really a pacifist. He became a Socialist, he was that -- of that ilk.

And he, he basically once -- just once -- when we were visiting and we were up in the mountain (my sister, myself, my sister was about five and I was about twelve) and we were high up Ausable Chasms in New York. Ausabel Chasm? I forget the --. And, my sister was fooling around, and she almost fell. She landed on the tree that was jutting out and there was a huge gorge – she would have died – and I was supposed to be watching her. Well they were supposed to be watching her, they were the parents! (Both laugh) But, my father immediately came over, yanked her up by the arm, and then he hit me, and then he cried. So that's the kind of guy he was. He could get very sent—and he was very sentimental. You know, he - he was an emotional man, it was an emotional man. And so many men, I think, are, you know, learn to be controlled. He wasn't always so controlled – but never really agitated. Although I think when he worked, in his work life, he had much more, the kind of leadership that could set people right. But even that, he would -- I asked someone after he died, what he was like. And (someone that he worked with for years) and he said, "He never put down people." He would say, "He was a difficult guy, he was a difficult guy." He didn't like to say, you know, all the negative stuff. So that's the way he dealt with people.

LEVINE: Yeah. Was he religious?

GASH: Not in the traditional sense, at all. He was basically critical of a lot of things he saw. He considered some things about religion – and maybe some Rabbis that he knew – hypocritical. He had that feeling. So

he was a pretty spiritual guy – and in my idea of religion, he wasn't an observer. But he tried to get -- on Yom Kippur, and all that -- to Temple. That kind of thing. And he did that out of respect for his parents, that kind of person.

LEVINE: Did you know his parents, your grandparents?

GASH: Yes, yes. Since they lived in the town – I lived in Paterson, and they – they lived a couple of streets away. And we would visit them, and we were close to them. And they were very Old World. As I remember them (and I was about -- maybe in my late teens when my grandfather died,. Or maybe a little later, maybe I was twenty, and my grandmother had died before that) but they lived in a railroad flat, dark and European looking (my idea of European, not having been there) but it had an Old World cast. You know, the kind of covers over the – over the couches, and that kind of thing. Very simple, poor, and dark.

LEVINE: Yeah. And, did they, did they want for their children, did they want their children to become Americanized, or did they want to keep those Old World values, do you think?

GASH: I think they must have been mixed. I don't know enough about this to answer it well – but I think they must have been mixed,. Because they certainly didn't – they weren't the kind of parents, I don't think, that encouraged education a lot. Unlike my mother's family, that -- that was more, a little more modernized. I think that they were really – my grandfather had a business in the apart— the railroad flat. The front room was his tailor shop, as it had been in Pabianice. And, when we went to Pabianice – should I tell you this now or?

LEVINE: Um, yeah, why not.

GASH: Well, when we went to Pabianice, my father had contacted the board (the City Hall). He had written to them – months before, and never heard. But then we had a guide from the town, who took us to the City Hall. And he had wanted to find the exact address, and he wasn't able to. But in five minutes, at the City Hall, the tour guide found the address. The name had changed when they were under Communist Rule, the name had changed when they were under more religious rule (Laughs), and so on.

LEVINE: The name of the street?

GASH: Yes. So we went back to the street. And we got out, and there was this low, blackened apartment house -- all one level. Sort of you know, a big vertical building, stone. And he said, "I don't recognize it." He was disappointed. So I said, "Well wait Dad, we'll walk through and see." And he walked through the building, and looked around – he didn't recognize anything.

LEVINE: This was now empty?

GASH: No. Being lived in -- poor area. Very -- maybe similar, but probably -- and more disrepair. And we walked out into a dirt courtyard

that was -- and there were other buildings all around it – big, dirt courtyard. And he stood there for a minute, and he looked down at the dirt, and he started to shake. He said, "There were geese in the yard, there were geese in this yard." And he got emotional, and then he remembered which apartment was his apartment. And we rang the bell, and the sole owner of the apartment – the guy who lived there – invited us in. And my father was able to say, "This is where the shop was, right here by this window.". And he remembered. Now this apartment was the size of an average bedroom. With a curtain – this man lived there, alone. And there was a curtain dividing – we never saw the bedroom – there was a curtain around the bedroom. There was another curtain around another area, but it was half the size of this room, each section. So it was very, Old World.

LEVINE: Now how many people were in your father's family when, when they lived there?

GASH: He had a brother who, who came to America,

LEVINE: First,

GASH: The oldest. And then he had a sister, and, she was about two years o—y-- younger than the first child. Irving, was the first. Florence was the next, and then Ceil – then my father and then Ceil. And my mother – I had the mother and father. And then one child was born in this country, Sophie. She lives in New York. All the others are deceased. My father – my uncle died at eighty-nine -- and my father thought that would happen to him. But he lived to ninety-five. He was pleased. (Laughs)

LEVINE: So he -- he kept his spirit right 'til the end, it sounds like.

GASH: He did. He was basically an optimist, and a fighter. So he felt that things could be changed, there was hope – he was a positive thinker.

LEVINE: So did he have much education?

GASH: He quit High School in the ninth grade. And, when they -- I always identify the apartment they lived in as the reason he went out onto the streets to sell newspapers, but it isn't, really. It's this -- that was one way for a kid to make money. And at the memorial service, I met a man. He came over to me and he said, "My name is Jack and I met your father when I was seven. He hired me, he was ten." So, I think that tells you a lot about what people were like then. They went out into the streets, hawking newspapers. And this guy said, "At four o'clock --" my father never told me this particular story about this man, that he hired. But it was just so (laughs) -- you know, ten years old, already –. My Mother always said he should've been an entrepreneur, 'cause she was disappointed. (Laughs)

LEVINE: Well, did he ever talk to you about being a newsboy, newspaper boy?

GASH: I don't think he ever talked about that. He told me that he sold papers, and that's all. He didn't talk about that much. He also told me that he caddied, on the golf course in the next town. Paterson, next to Paterson.

LEVINE: Do you have any stories that he told you about how he got involved in organizing?

GASH: Yes. He – when he had his first job as a shipping clerk in a silk mill in Paterson, he was about eighteen. And he wa-- defined himself as a playboy. Because what he liked to do is go to the pinball machine on the corner with his gang of friends, and play pinballs. Or, he liked basketball – he was on a team – and he even did a little boxing. So he made a little money -- small jobs, I'm sure. And I always compare him to – who's that actor that, was kind of tough guy, a Jewish character? – I forget his name now. He died very young – oh, what is his name? But I'll, it'll come to me. This actor, they were kinda built the same way.

LEVINE: Same way.

GASH: But anyway, he -- he was at this place on the corner (the corner store) playing with his friends, and a man came along that knew him because he was a friend of his father's. And he said, "Sol. Why aren't you at the meeting?" He said, "What meeting?" He said, "Your co- where you're working. They're going out on strike, they're having a meeting now. You should be there. What kind of nice Jewish boy from your background, isn't with the group, with the team, with the workers?" Well, he gave him a-- he really admonished him. And my father left the building, said goodbye to his friends. And he says (romantically speaking, I think) he ran all the way to where the meeting was. Over the -- he likes to say, "Over the Arch Street Bridge, and down through that alley, and I got there!" And the meeting was on, and when he listened to what they were talking about, he said he stood up and he shouted, "I'm with you guys, I'm here, I'm one of you!." You know, that kind of thing (laughs). And I believe it! I think, you know, he may have exaggerated a bit, but I think that -- that was his nature.

And then he became a shop steward in that mill – his first union job. Then an organizer, and so on. And he kept moving up. He was the Regional Director for the Textile Workers Union, the Vice President, and so on. Then, in 1980, around 1980, he gave up his presidency. No. 1972 he gave up his presidency and there was a merger with the -- with the clothing workers, Amalgamated Clothing Workers. Because, he had spent a lot of effort when he was the President, to -- trying to get some unionized shops in the South. Because a lot of textile mills were, the companies were moving to the South where labor was cheap. So, he was hopeful that he could do something down there. And he couldn't – they were not as huge a Union as the ILGWU. That was it – Ladies Garment Workers. So they merged. And then later, after my father's time, they also merged. The two of those Unions merged with the Amalgamated Clothing Workers and then they all became called -- they called themselves Unite. And then they merged with a few more unions, and now it's called Unite Here.

LEVINE: So he gave up his Presidency because, what? The union,

GASH: Because they didn't have the money and the manpower to – to -- for this campaign in the South to unionize J.P. Steven's company, primarily. And it took seventeen years, and they unionized J.P. Stevens. He was already – because of the union rules, he had to retire. He was already retired, but thrilled about that. And he was given credit for that. And there's – I have an article, if you want to look at it sometime – that the Nation (with a picture of him) had in one of their issues around that time. And the article is about why -- it's called 'Why Sol Stetin Stepped Down.' And I have it, I'll give you a copy.

LEVINE: That would be great, we'll put that in the folder too. So did, after he stepped down, did he continue in any way, being active?

GASH: Oh, he certainly did. He wanted – he heard about a building in Haledon, New Jersey, which is five minutes from Paterson, like a suburb. And that building was in the home -- was the home of Pietro Botto, a worker who had been a Paterson textile worker during the 1913 silk strike. A huge strike in American history. And the workers went out on strike. And they couldn't – they were aband--, they were -- they were chased from Paterson by the police. They couldn't meet in Paterson. So that guy (Pieto -- Pietro Botto) said, "You can come to my house, and meet for gatherings." And they would meet every Sunday for the seven months of the strike at this home, which is on a hill now surrounded by houses. But then a place where people could – and thousands came to the meeting. There were over twenty three thousand workers on strike in the Paterson area – Passaic and towns around Paterson. They were all on strike, it was a big strike. And that was 1913, and my father had this dream, of making that building a labor museum. And he (with no education, almost single-handedly), he did that -- with the help of the, um, the survivor of that family who lived in the house.

LEVINE: Oh my God.

GASH: Her name was Botto. But when she was married, her name became Kuiken, K-U-I-K-E-N, Bunny Kuiken. And Bunny lives across the street now. She moved from that house when they made it a museum. And now it's a National Landmark Building called the American Labor Museum Botto House and he was the first president – of the – of the --. And one time he called me and said, "I'm going to the Smithsonian." Now, I don't think that he ever knew in all the years of his labor, his leadership in the Union, anything about the Smithsonian. 'Cause he was very directed and very focused. But, he said, "I'm learning museum-ing." (laughter) And it was so cute, because he sort of always had a little bit of high regard for education – extremely high regard for education. But he had that something that people who don't have an education; "I did it myself." kind of thing, you know. So he had that quality. And, yet, there's a building wing in -- at Rutgers University named for him. It's called the 'Sol Stetin Wing' and that was while he was alive -- just after he be-- got an Honorary Doct – doctorate from Rutgers University, which he was very proud of. And also, very proud of me when I was the first female editor of the High School newspaper, and when I went on to college and began to write, he --

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BEGIN SIDE B

GASH: --- he really valued writing, education, and lifelong learning. And he was a lifelong learner! So that was the quality – am I bragging too much here?

LEVINE: No, this is, this is perfect. I mean, this is true. (Laughs) You're not bragging.

GASH: It is, it is, it is.

LEVINE: So, so, why did he get the, did they specify why they were giving, Rutgers was giving him this Honorary Doctorate, and, and, naming a wing after him?

GASH: Yes, that's a good question, a good point, that I should have pointed out. He had been active in the AFL-CIO in the state of New Jersey. He had taught, minimally, but in their Labor Education Center at Rutgers. He was one of their people that they bring in, you know, on the people with -- on the -- experience on the -- in the work place. And he was a pretty good speaker. He was a very good speaker in this sense. We used to laugh. He would talk in a room in the house as if he were talking to two hundred people at a meeting -- because he could do it. But in the house, you know. (Both laugh) Basically, "Dad! You don't have to make that much noise!" (Laughs) But that's the way he was – he was a very dramatic speaker. So he had a, you know, they wo—they -- people would laugh at him a little bit, 'cause he was so, come on strong speaking.

LEVINE: Adamant,

GASH: Very, very. But it, you know, was something he cultivated. And Rutgers valued him because he gave it of his time, and he had started out in Paterson, and the – and the Textile Workers were largely in Paterson. So he had a very strong identity as a New Jersey person – that's another reason. You know, and then his contribution to the Labor Movement, which the Labor Education Center, of course, respected.

LEVINE: Now, it sounds like something of your mother rubbed off, why don't you give a little bit about your mother's background, and how they met?

GASH: Ok. My mother's father was a textile worker.

LEVINE: An immigrant as well.

GASH: An immigrant. He came from Poland, the same town – yeah – which, not the suburb Pabianice, but the town a few minutes away. Now that I've been there I know – very close. And the same kind of mills, these red brick mills. It looked so similar, Paterson to that town – it was really fascinating. My grandmother and grandfather came over as immigrants. They had one child at the time. And when they came on the boat, the

child died -- on the boat coming over. And they buried him in the sea – it's in my book of poems. And then they came here, and they had some more children. My mother had two, I mean three brothers and she was the only girl. And my mother's father was very much like my father – not as much of an activist – but the same point of view. He cared about working class people. He was a Liberal, what we'd say now. But he was proud of it, as my father was, and we all are in our family. (Laughs)

LEVINE: So, how, do you think, that your mother's parents knew people from Lodz, that had come to Paterson because of the similarity of work?

GASH: Yes. Yes. There were people, and when they came, they already had some relatives in Paterson. I don't know if that's true of my father's family. I know that my uncle was in Paterson – but I don't know how many other relatives. But there were other relatives on both -- both families that came to America around the same time, and, yes, there were a lot of people from that – and, and, I think they had an organization. There is -- there is a Jewish Historical Society for that area around Paterson, and I think I even have one of the copies of their little brochure. And I think it says that they were from – they maybe call themselves, Lodier [sic], they had a name.

LEVINE: Lodzias.

GASH: Yeah, something like that. So there were people from there, yes, because of the silk industry – they could get work.

LEVINE: Were there mostly Jewish people working in the silk industry at that time, like when you were growing up, or were there other immigrant groups there?

GASH: There were definitely others, but particularly Italian. A lot of Italians came. And my friend that I want you to meet, she's had connections to—so, not silk as much. I don't know -- I don't know if she had silk, but she was from North Caldwell near Paterson. And she's from Italy. She's from Sicily, and they came. So a lot of people that she knew came, and a lot of people that I knew came. There was a real -- almost a ghetto -- Jewish section of Paterson, even when I was growing up in the '40s and '50s. But there was -- there were lots of other ethnic groups. Paterson was a melting pot, and it still is. Different ethnic groups -- but, Arabs now, and a lot of people from Latin American countries. Paterson was a – was a melting pot, attracting a lot of people.

LEVINE: Maybe you could say anything else about growing up in Paterson, that you remember.

GASH: Right. Ok. I remember -- it wasn't taught in the books, but my father would talk about the labor history. So I knew something about labor history. I knew Paterson had a turbulent history. I also did study that Alexander Hamilton thought that Paterson was perfectly located to be a 'National Manufactory,' he called it. And he was prominent in New Jersey politics at the time, so he was able to bring power to the city. There were -- the Great Falls is there. There was water power,

because – and there was a river. There's the Passaic River. So Paterson was, and early on, a locomotive center, a center of industry. It had – all through the 19th century, it was a thriving, industrial city. But then, at the end of the 19th century, it became a hot bed of Radicalism. So that, in the 1913 strike, when the workers were out on strike; people like Upton Sinclair, John Reid, Emma Goldman – people like that – came to that house, the Botto House, and lectured, and talked, and supported the workers. And they, and it's a lovely place. It's old. It's a charming, restored old house -- now a museum with a wonderful curator who takes people around and educates people. So. I think the group from Save Ellis Island had been there the day before I gave my talk, so they knew something about the Botto House.

But the-. So I knew something about Paterson's early history. And so I knew about the turbulence in the city -- the violent stru-- battles between the police and the powers that be, and the workers. So I grew up with that. But my father also grew up -- his formative years -- in, during the Depression. So I heard something about the impact of the Depression on their lives, and the lives of people in Paterson. And, I knew that how much he adored Roosevelt, and John L. Lewis was one of his heroes too. And – the strike that was very – also a national strike. A hundred and seventy four thousand people were part of this national strike, which was a textile strike centered in the beginning in Paterson in 1934. So there were a lot -- there's a lot of history about that city, that I grew up with. But when I grew up in an ordinary, basically lower-middle- class section, but very vigorous, and active, and very clean, and very nice; I lived in a two family home, on the lower floor in a very nice apartment. And my father didn't believe in private property, so he really never wanted to own a home. And my mother – she called herself the Capitalist in the family – she wanted a home of her own.

So, finally, when they were in their sixties, they bought a little patio house in Florida, and they had that for the winter. And then they eventually spent more and more time there, when they were in their seventies and eighties, and even early nineties. So, they never, he never wanted to leave Paterson – he loved it, he identified with it. But, when my mother got kind of sick and they decided they wanted to move -- not to Florida, but to be near my sister in St.Louis. Because we looked around for a place in New Jersey, and my mother and my father felt there was nothing that they liked, and it was much more expensive than moving to St. Louis. So they moved to a senior – beautiful place, ten minutes from my sister's home in St. Louis. And they lived their 'till they both died.

LEVINE: Wow. What was your mother's name, and maiden name?

GASH: Her maiden name was Goldstein, and Frieda is her first name.

LEVINE: And would you say that your mother and father complemented each other?

GASH: I cou--. I would say that my mother and father – and I have a poem I could give you, at some point, about their marriage. It's called

"Anniversary Couple," and it's about how they did and didn't get along. There was a lot of conflict over his work. Because in the early days, when he was an organizer, he wasn't home enough. And he would disappoint her. He'd say, "I'll be home for the weekend," and then he'd call and he'd say, "Something important has come up. We have to -- we're on the picket line. We -- I can't come home." And he would come home on Sunday, maybe, instead of Friday. And that was the way it was for the early years. And, her friend's husbands were moving up the ladder, and he wasn't, because it was a poor union, and there was no money in the early days. And he said, "That's the way it is, and we can live. We'll manage." And they did! And eventually, he was paid a decent salary, and got very good benefits, and so on. So he was able to enjoy his older years.

Yes, but my mother had a lot of mixed feelings about his work. Her father had a certain point of view, and she understood it. But she basically would have liked to be more a part of what she considered the American Dream – which was success, material success (Laughs). So she disagreed with him about a lot of things. But she also deferred to him. She was from that generation of women who, um, took a backseat. And she would say things like, "On the back of this worker at home." (Laughs) He was out there helping workers. (Both laugh) Because she did all the – my mother was good at some of the domestic arts, which I'm not good at. Like she could fix floorboards, she could fix an iron – she was handy, and she learned to do all those things 'cause he really would travel quite a bit in those years. And he would be away for a week at a time sometimes. 'Cause he was the Regional Director of the East Coast Unions, and all the mills along the – from Massachusetts down to, maybe, Rhode Islan—down to, near Washington D.C. So he had a big area to cover, yeah.

LEVINE: Did you grow up feeling proud of him?

GASH: Yes. I did. There were some experiences, though, where people would make fun of a labor leader. In High School, I had a few people that would say, "He's one of those Commies." And my father was very quick to acknowledge that Communism was not a good thing – he saw through it. Even though he was a Socialist, he was a realist too – very pragmatic. And he had no use for Communism. He had no use because he ha—he was a Pacifist and they were violent. And he saw that. In the '30s and '40s he saw that. So he was not ever identified in any way with Communism.

LEVINE: Can you think of any instances where the attitudes and the values that he – and/or your mother – tried to instill in you? I mean, by example, obvious, but anything that comes to mind?

GASH: When I, when I remember complaining about some things that were going on in the country, and he would say, "You're not working to change things. If you don't like the way things are, go out and change them, don't complain!" But I would say, "Well Dad, you're a reformer, I'm not an activist like you." But, I always admired, and I valued -- and even now, I'm in my little town, which is pretty conservative (Laughs), I'm on the Democratic Committee, and I'm on the ballot as a Democratic Committee-woman. So I'm somewhat active. But in my way, in my writing,

I've always, you know, focused on some of the things that I don't like about the political scene. So I'm, I have the same point of view, now so I've – the values are there. My mother's values are there, too, because I like comfort, I like beauty. And I've always had a more – my mother was more artistic, and in the domestic arts especially, because she could make – she could sew, beautifully. Everyone in the family had something to do with textile – everybody, in some form, almost everyone I knew in Paterson.

And my mother was a sewer – she could make me a gown. She did, for a wedding. She could make, she made these beautiful beaded bags. She could, she could make them – design things, too, in her own way. So that she didn't need a pattern – she was that good. And I always – from my mother, I think – developed a real love of beauty. My mother had that. It wasn't well developed, but in Florida she took painting classes. That was the type of thing she cared about. She made a sculptured bird in the class. She never developed it. And yet, I think my mother could've because she had potential. But, again, she was taken out of school at the age of thirteen because her mother was mentally ill. And her mother was mentally ill partly because her mother had come from Odessa in Russia and lost -- in a pogrom -- her mother, her father, and her two brothers. Had all been – all perished when the Cossacks came through the town. And she was alone and walked to a town in Poland (which at then was a part of Russia, but far away) -- she had to go alone and -- where cousins lived. And the town was Lodz, L-O-D-Z, and that's where she met my grandfather when she was about seventeen. And they married a year later.

LEVINE: Did your father meet your mother in the, in the textile mill?

GASH: No. My father worked for my mother – his first job, it didn't last long – in a store in Paterson, a department store called Quackenbush's. She was the head, so called (laughs) of the shoe department. She was a shoe saleswoman. She was two years younger than him. So he was about twenty, and she was about eighteen. And a year later, they married – she was nineteen and he was twenty-one. So, so that's – oh no, he was older. I'm sorry, four years, he was four years older than my mother. So he took that job, didn't like it, and then went to work as a shipping clerk. That was his next job, in the mill. So he was working in the mill, when they married.

LEVINE: And were they, was your father ever naturalized as a citizen?

GASH: Yes, I have the papers. He became a citizen. Yes, very, very proud to be an American citizen.

LEVINE: Do you remember that?

GASH: No. I have no memory of it at all, and he rarely talked about that. He just took it for granted that he was gonna be an American.

LEVINE: I see. Now your mother and father had how many children?

GASH: My sister and myself. I'm the older one, she's the younger one. She was a teacher for many years, and now she's taking care of her grandchildren (Both laugh).

LEVINE: So do you think your father's values affected her and her life?

GASH: Yes. But not so much as it affected me, until they moved to St. Louis. As old as he was, he became immediately involved. He was ninety when he moved to St. Louis. He became involved with the textile workers and there was a woman – there was a joke about this. There was a woman who he had known in his union, also retired but very young compared to him, in her late sixties. And she would take him places, and introduce him to a lot of different people, and there was a joke about Joan Suarez being his other woman (Laughs). But, of course, my father was a very loyal man. And he wasn't interested of course, he was already ninety. But anyway, this woman was lovely and became a family friend. And she took him around. And just before he died, they had him on television in St. Louis. He was a little guy when he started, five foot four, and he must have shrunken quite a bit.

And there was a march. There was a strike because in one of the universities -- I think it was Washington University -- the janitors were on strike, and there was a march in town that d-- a protest. And he was in a little car and the window was down, and he was – instead of walking, like most of them – he was in the car, with a hat on, and waving to everybody. It was televised, and he was interviewed. Because he was a character by then, he had a bit of a character. He was, you know, still, you know, honking his horn, so to speak (Both laugh), and the Union's horn. So, there he was, televised -- and we have a tape of it somewhere, of his speaking in, from the car – you know. The microphone came over, and he started rabble rousing. (Both laugh)

LEVINE: Do you want to say anything about his eulogy, anything about it that—

GASH: You mean the eulogy for him?

LEVINE: Yeah.

GASH: It was very moving, if that's what you mean. It was in St. Louis, and every member of our family said something. My two daughters got up and spoke. One read a beautiful poem that was, I forget who wrote it, but a classic poem that was very relevant. My other daughter, who was more like my father than anyone in the family – she became a lawyer, married a lawyer, and became a state representative in Illinois where she lives. She lives in Highland Park, Illinois. She became a state representative, and was re-elected several times. So every two years for eight years, and then she ran for Congress the same year that Gore ran. I think it was 2000? I think it was 2000. And, she lost by five thousand votes – which was very close – in the Tenth Congressional District. So she – and now she's very, very active in politics, and may even run again, at some point.

And her two children even spoke, my grandchildren – college. One has just graduated from Stanford University, and the other one is a sophomore – a junior, coming up at the University of Kansas. And my sister's children, and my sister spoke. My sister's speech was very moving, and so was my niece' and nephew's. One nephew – she had, my sister has three children – one is a guitarist. He played the guitar and sang some folk songs. He's very talented, he did a beautiful job. Her son Scott is a lawyer, and he spoke eloquently. And Lisa is an occupational therapist and she spoke -- and had a lot to say. Because she was very, very close to her grandfather, probably closer than any other grandchildren.

LEVINE: This is the one who was most like him?

GASH: No, this is my daughter who was most like him. Like him, in the sense of political. But Lisa was close to him emotionally. She used to go down to Florida a lot. She used to -- had some work there, trained there, and she lived with them for a short while. And I don't want to forget to say my daughter, Amy, the other one --Lauren is the one who lives in Illinois and ran for Congress -- Amy, who wrote a book of her own, edited a book called, "What the Dormouse Said: Lessons for Grownups from Children's Literature." When she was with her son, home, she would gather together all kinds of quotations from children's literature – and there had been no book like that – and after she finished, the book was sold in one minute. Now, I wrote a book, called "Silk Elegy," poetry, about my mother's early life and her mother who was mentally ill, and about life in Paterson, New Jersey. My book has sold very few books compared – copies—poetry doesn't sell as well. Her book was bought by Scholastic Books. Like ten thousand books they bought, for their fairs that they have around the country. So she's sold a huge number of books, but she's basically an editor at Algonquin Press, and equally talented I like to say.

LEVINE: Yes (Laughs).

GASH: And, also, a number of key union people -- including Bruce Rayner [ph], the president of Act – the president of Unite Here, the merged unions -- came out to St. Louis and spoke. And a few other old friends of his from the Union spoke – it was very moving, very, very moving. Did anyone else speak? Union people, family, I think that was it. And it was – very, very moving. Then, a month later, here in New Jersey at the American Labor Museum, there was a –

LEVINE: Tribute to –

GASH: Memorial service, yeah. And there were -- there -- because he didn't know that many people in St. Louis, there weren't as many people – here, there were maybe well over two hundred people who came to the Labor Museum. Crowded as it was, it was loaded with people, and everybody spoke again. Different, you know – the same people came, Bruce Rayner [ph], other people, and they spoke. And it was very moving again.

LEVINE: Did your father ever say anything about the incredible success he actually had in what he was doing?

GASH: Yes. He, he liked to – I feel in some ways that he made the most of his Horatio Alger story. He would like to repeat it and tell people about it. And he – yes, I would say he actually mytholog -- he liked to mythologize himself, sort of. He had a, you know, as I said, a big ego, and he would do things like that. So I think his spunk, his daring, came out of --. Unlike some people maybe who might have, you know, become depressed from living poor in the beginning and coming here from another country and all that – it didn't do that to him. So he was very proud of his spirit, and he knew that he could get what he wanted – that was one of his strengths. He was a people person. He wasn't really bookish – he read, but, basically, he learned from people and from activity. So he would – he would say that about himself. I remember – I actually remember when I was in high school listening to him prepare a speech and read it out loud and ask my advice, when I was fifteen. "How did that sound, did I say it right," you know, and he would jokingly say, "You're the writer, you're the writer!" Because I was an editor of the high school paper – the editor, and he was very impressed with anything like that, but he basically was more people oriented than an intellectual.

But yes, he, I feel that my father was a kind of person who really loved to read about other immigrants. Dave Dubinsky, Studs Terkel, peop-- Irving Howe – people that wrote about immigration. I think most his reading had to do with immigration, and Americans who made it in the world that he lived in -- the Labor Movement. That was – we used to say his first love, his first family was the Labor Movement, and then we came next. And there was a little bit of that, because he really would rather have been on the work scene – and I think that came out of his early experience. And, you know, as I said in the poem, he really was proud that he was ten -- and because it was so crowded in the station they got on the train, and the train was pulling away and there he was, alone at ten -- and that he could handle figuring out how to get on the next train, knowing that they'd be awaiting for him in the next town, and they were. So, that's the kind of psyche he had. So I would say yes, he – he – he made --- I feel I'm a victim, in a way, of his self-promotion, to be honest with you. He had that quality, he had that quality.

LEVINE: Well, what makes you satisfied about, about the writings you've done, relevant to immigration, and your father, and your background.

GASH: Well, I think that it was installed [sic] in me at a very young age. Because when I was fourteen, I had a curvature of the spine and I had to go to the hospital to be operated on. So we were going to New York to Mount Sinai, and I was being dropped off by my parents. And my father – in the room, I still remember this – gave me a little pad, very nice, like a notebook, no writing in it. He said, "You can write." I was fourteen, it was before I became a writer – a so-called writer -- in the, high school. He said, "You can write, write everything down. You'll have it that way, you'll remember everything that way," and I did. So he valued my doing that. Then, later, when I started really being interested in writing (even the personal writing, not journalism. I started out doing journalistic type writing) I got – I got -- I thought I would write a novel.

Which was a little much to chew, when I hadn't written other long pieces. And I got distracted, and starting writing short pieces, like some of the poems. And, then, I thought, "I'm going to write about my mother!" And she didn't want to talk about her childhood. I felt if I knew the background, I knew the early story of my mother better; I could get a better handle on her as a character for the novel I was gonna write, where she was the adult! So I said, "Ma, tell me about your childhood." "I don't wanna talk about it, it was too painful." And then, slowly, by talking with her a little bit and remembering a few things she had said. And then talking with other members of the family. I began to realize that my grandmother had been more than just a little meshuggah [cracked], as we had said then, but that she was really mentally off. And then I married a psychologist. And when he met her, just in the early part of our marriage -- she died maybe after we were married two years -- he said, you know, she's got – I think we would call her bi-polar now.

You know, she was – she was the kind of person who would be very exciting at family affairs. She was perceptive, she would tell stories about the family members, and all that. But then she'd go into hiding, in dark – closeted herself in her room, and cried a lot. So that she was put in a -- I think they called them an asylum, or a sanitor- you know. They didn't – they weren't --and they weren't educated people. So they didn't have much knowledge at that point. And my mother had to leave school before she was put in the asylum, because she was – she had to be -- somebody had to stay home. Her brothers were already – one or two were already out in the work world, and one was in high school, and she was the girl. So the girl stayed home. And I found out why my mother had been in some ways suffocated -- for her mother was so demanding and very strong personality, this mentally ill mother. So I started writing about my mother from the point of view of a girl (my mother). I called her Fay, instead of Frieda. And my, that book "Silk Elegy" incorporates the life in the 1920s when my mother was growing up, so I of course wasn't alive. And then I thought, "Well now I can write my work, and I know what my mother's like more," and so, I'm working on that now. And I've written a lot of poems now about my father. And I've also worked on – begun to work on the novel, which is about a girl (so based on me) who is a curator in a museum in Paterson – fictionalized, you know. So.

LEVINE: Ok, well we're at the end of the tape, and I think we really have kind of covered ---

END OF INTERVIEW

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